PRAIRIE FIRE

Newsletter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Wisconsin
Volume 3 Number 1 May (Beltane) 2003

The Incomplete, True, Authentic & Wonderful History of

May Day!

(excerpts from a nifty 1986 booklet by the same name available upon request)

The Green Side of May Day:

With the leafing of the trees in spring, people celebrated the "fructifying spirit of vegetation" to use the phrase of J.G Fraser, the anthropologist. They did this in May, a month named after Maia, the mother of all the gods according to the ancient Greeks, giving birth to Zeus...In 1644 the Puritans in England abolished May Day altogether. To these work ethicists the festival was obnoxious for paganism and worldliness...The people resisted the repressions. Thenceforth, they called their May sports, the "Robin Hood Games"...The May feast was presided over by the "Lord of Misrule," the "King of Unreason" and the "Abbot of Inobedience." Washington Irving was later to write that the feeling for May "has become chilled by habits of gain and traffic." As the gainers and traffickers sought to impose the regimen of monotonous work, the people responded to preserve their holyday...

The Red Side of May Day:

In England the attacks on May Day were a necessary part of the wearisome, unending attempt to establish industrial work discipline. ...On May Day 1830, a founder of the Knights of Labor, the United Mine Workers, and the Wobblies was born in Ireland, Mary Harris Jones, aka "Mother Jones." She was a Maia of the American working class... On May 4th 1886 several thousand people gathered near Haymarket Square to hear what August Spies, a

newspaperman, had to say about the shootings at the McCormick works. Albert Parsons, a typographer and labor leader spoke next...At 10:30 pm 176 policemen charged the crowd that had dwindled to about 200. An unknown hand threw a stick of dynamite, the first time that Alfred Nobel's invention was used in class battle. All hell broke lose, many were killed, and the rest is history. Eight men were railroaded in Chicago at a farcical trial. Four men hanged on "Black Friday," Nov. 11 1887. "There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today," said Spies before he choked...

International Workers Day:

May Day or "The Day of the Chicago Martyrs" as it is still called in Mexico "belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution," as Eugene Debs put it in his May Day editorial of 1907...In Boston on May Day 191 the young telephone workers threatened to strike, and 20,000 workers in Lawrence went on strike again for the 8-hour day... In the 1930s Lucy Parsons marched in Chicago at May Day with her young friend Studs Terkel. May Day 1946 the Arabs began a general strike in Palestine...

1968 was a good year for May Day. Allen Ginsberg was made the "Lord of Misrule" in Prague before the Russians got there... The climax to the '68 Mai was reached in France where there wa a gigantic General Strike... On May Day in 1971 President Nixon couldn't sleep. He ordered 10,000 paratroopers and marines to Washington D.C. because he was afraid that some people calling themselves the May Day Tribe might succeed in their goal of blocking access to the Department of Justice... Yet May Day was always a troubling day in America some wished to forget it... In 1947 Congress declared it to be "Loyalty Day." Yet, these attempts to hide the meaning of the day have never succeeded. As the Wobblies used to say, "We Won't Forget."

Pathology of Pacifism, Direct Action, and Diversity of Tactics

By: Prairie Fire Collective- UW Infoshop (I.U. 620)

Over the weekend of April 26-27, there were two well-attended back-to-back events in Madison with lessons for the broader peace movement. One was the five hour direct action training hosted by the UW Infoshop, GDC, Five Lakes Anarchist Guild, and other "riff raff" on Sat.; the other was the riveting three hour discussion with Ward Churchill on Sun., the keynote speaker for the 2003 Madison Earth Day to May Day Celebration.

As a longtime radical and COINTELPRO survivor, Churchill had much good advice for activists surviving and struggling in today's Homeland Insecurity climate. Terrorism - once used to describe illegitimate state violence - has since been expropriated by the wholesaler and relegated to the retail level. Those engaged in activities that challenge state authority are now deemed terrorists, and once so defined subject to losing their rights and citizenship. If the FBI considered the Black Panther Party's child nutrition program a "grave threat to national security" back in 1969, one can only imagine what evil lurks within today's worldwide peace movement.

Churchill went on to argue that in such a pervasive oppressive atmosphere, nonviolence becomes a nice philosophical stance that won't really spare anyone or lead to social change. Even Gandhi admitted (and threatened) to take up arms if his peaceful struggle with the British Empire proved ineffective. Self defense is not degrading, acquiescence to authority is. Activists who want to make a difference do not disempower themselves through intentional ignorance - one must be prepared to use all tools available. For Churchill, it is downright hypocritical to find U.S. folks supporting armed resistance, sabotage, and independence movements elsewhere without considering the potential of such direct action closer to home.

Just when the worldwide peace movement needs to be more inclusive and creative, one encounters an intolerant backlash against "radical" (ie unconventional) tactics, usually couched in a holier than thou, blame the victim attitude. Too often we get to hear : "peaceful parades have official permits;" "only criminals hide behind masks;" "the rowdy kids were just asking to get pepper sprayed" One wonders how many of today's "peace police" would have condemned the Boston Tea Party for destroying private property, alienating the masses, provoking state violence, etc.

The direct action training was an attempt to grapple with this debate directly, and inject some fresh blood into an increasingly predictable, reformist, boring, and ineffective peace movement. Covering such topics as security culture, affinity groups, consensus process, and action planning, the workshop drew a couple dozen activists of all ages from as far away as Milwaukee. In fact, Milwaukee Wobblies are already planning to host a similar training for their community in the near future. At one point in his talk, Churchill proudly proclaimed: "I'm not a U.S. revolutionary, I'm a devolutionary! I want the U.S. gone altogether." We need more of this type of praxis happening "outside the box."

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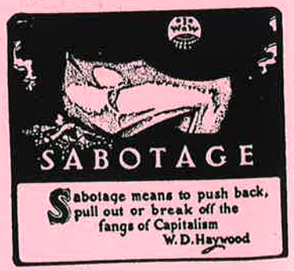


Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) May Day 2003 – Solidarity Statement

The First of May is a traditional time to celebrate the return of Spring to the northern hemisphere and the natural solidarity of workers around the world.

This year, however, the mood of workers is considerably subdued. As workers gather to celebrate the international worker's holiday, we look upon a world becoming more and more unstable. From the invasion of Iraq, to the economic crisis, to continuing attacks upon working class organizations and living conditions, everywhere there is war - against workers.

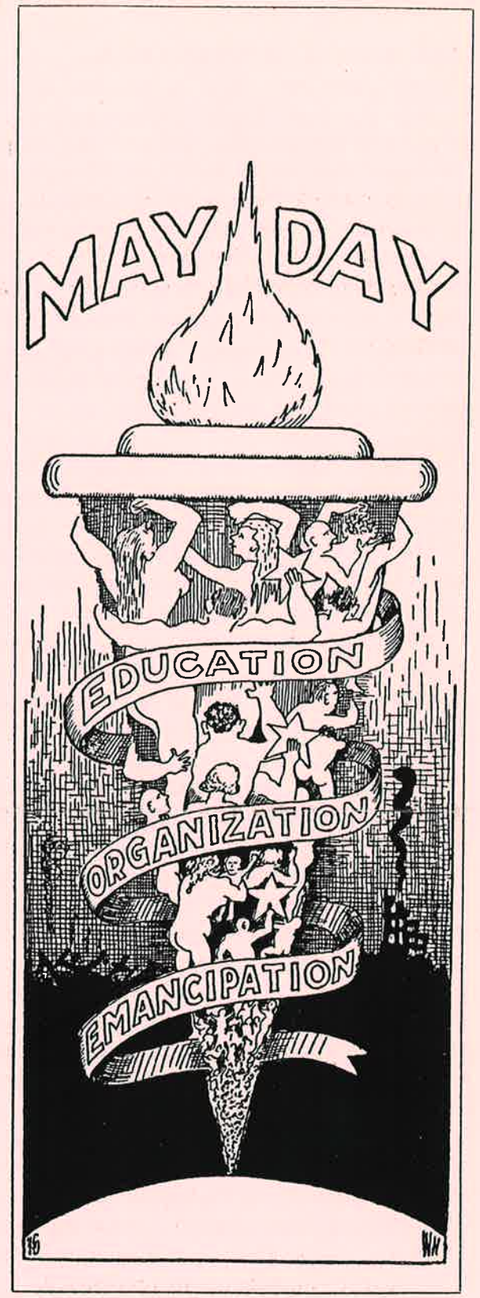
Understanding Our Strength

Before the invasion of Iraq began, several unions, most notably in Italy and the United Kingdom, made efforts to use their power as workers to stop the transport of war materials. As an IWW poet said years ago, "Without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn". The ruling class - international capitalism, needs us to do its bidding. When we organize and refuse its orders, we can start to define an alternative to the "New World Order".

Organization Needed

The scattered demonstrations and isolated local acts of rebellion will not be enough to defeat our well-organized opponents. The expression of moral or political outrage may have passing influence, but in the long term has little effect. In fact, the ruling class needs riots and violent demonstrations, using them as an excuse for funding repressive police forces and further restricting our rights.

In order to fight a well-organized, highly centralized enemy, we need to transform spontaneous mass protests into reliable, democratic organizations of mutual aid and support. These structures need to emphasize the working class strengths - solidarity, economic power, and internationalism.



Anne Feeney, Chris Chandler, Vicki Guzmán Do Wisconsin!

As part of an Earth Day to May Day tour, Wobblies and other activists enjoyed several shows featuring labor troubadour, Anne Feeney; spoken word artist, Chris Chandler (both out of Pittsburgh); as well as former Madison folksinger and rabblerouser, Vicki Guzmán (now in Toronto). Besides a concert at UW-Madison on Fri. 4/25, they also joined a rally for striking Tyson workers in Jefferson and a community peace sing-along to commemorate the bombing of Guernica in Madison both on Sat. 4/26. On Mon 4/28 they went on to Milwaukee for a Workers Memorial Day concert in Zeidler Park. Much thanks to Anne, Chris, and Vicki for bringing the voice of solidarity to Wisconsin! And, yes, we have their CDs on hand – see our Wobbly merchandise listing - or go to: www.annefeeney.com

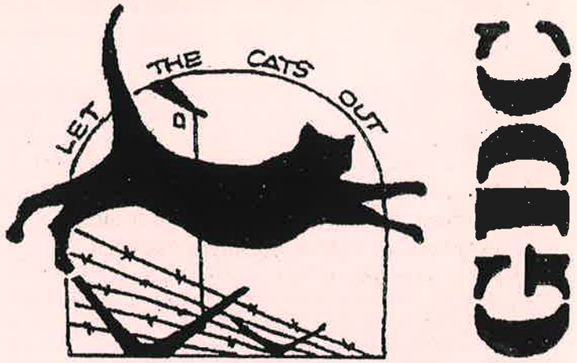
GDC Takes on the Powers That Be!
By: FW John Peck

Now more than ever, the Madison Area General Defense Committee (Local 4) needs your support! In these troubled times, it is critical that all activists be prepared and build support networks within their own communities. In conjunction with the National Lawyers Guild, the Madison GMB of the IWW, and the UW Infoshop among others, the GDC has been working hard to organize trainings, produce and distribute factsheets, support legal observers for protests, maintain a bailfund, etc.

On March 27th and 28th the GDC helped host two popular workshops by members of the Midnight Special Law Collective from the Bay Area and Detroit. These "street-wise" activists (who also know how to defend their rights and those of others!) noted that the primary objective of the Patriot Act and Homeland Security is to create a climate of fear/terror/paranoia in order to stifle political dissent and squash grassroots resistance. Today we're facing a bizarre sinister hybrid of George Orwell's 1984 and J. Edgar Hoover's CONTELPRO. Good security culture is always key if one opts to employ "unconventional" protest tactics - and this is even more so under heightened surveillance, harassment, and provocation. The Midnight Special folks were excited to hear about expanded GDC activities and look forward to future solidarity and collaboration.

Also on March 27th the GDC was called into action to defend two local activists arrested by Madison police during a 300 strong "Books Not Bombs" protest outside the UW-Madison Army Recruiting Center (for details: www.madison.indymedia.org). After being freed with generous donations from concerned citizens and by dipping into the local GDC bailfund, those targeted chose to fight their frivolous charges. Their defense attorney is still soliciting eyewitness accounts - please send statements ASAP to: lgoldman@nagel-law.com

People can also contact officials to drop the charges and impose a citywide ban on "non-lethal" weapon use by local police and other "public servants": District Attorney Brian Blanchard #608-266-4211; Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz #608-266-4611; Police Chief Richard Williams #608-266-4664



During the March 27 incident, Madison police indiscriminantly pepper sprayed about 30 anti-war protesters, shoppers, and other bystanders - triggering a fresh wave of public outcry against state terrorism and police brutality. Police have been quite casual with pepper spray in Madison of late, using it against peaceful protesters during a UW-Madison anti-sweatshop sit-in back in Feb. 2000 and against drunken Halloween revelers on State St. just last year, triggering a full blown riot. Given that many folks were unprepared for the disorientation, blindness, vomiting, and respiratory problems from chemical weapon exposure, the UW Infoshop (IWW I.U. 620) has now prepared a handy booklet titled "An Activist's Guide to Police Chemical Weapons." For copies contact the UW Infoshop, or download a version from: www.sit.wisc.edu/~infoshop

You can help build the GDC and defend your rights by joining, coming to the next meeting (Tues. May 13th 5:00 pm at the UW Infoshop - 31 Univ. Sq.) and/or donating to the GDC bailfund. Formal membership is just $25/year! - a portion of which also goes to the good work of the national committee (www.iww.org/gdc/) GDC brochures are available at Rainbow Bookstore, Mifflin St. Co-op, Lakeside Press, and the UW Infoshop. One can also send a check to: GDC Legal Defense Fund, P.O. Box 811, Madison, WI 53701 More info? #608-262-9036 Those interested in becoming legal observers can contact: sonic_domingo@yahoo.com to find out about the next training.

Yo Quiero Justicia! -

The Struggle Against Taco Bell
By: FW Mike Moon

For three years the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a Florida based farmworker organization (not a union, there are no federal laws ensuring farmworkers the right to organize), has been educating consumers about the conditions farmworkers face in the fields of Florida. They have a had a boycott against Taco Bell campaign underway since 2001. Their goal is to demonstrate that once consumers know what is happening they won't support companies that participate in such exploitation.

In February 2003 the CIW staged a ten day hungerstrike in front of Taco Bell headquarters in Irvine California. The National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) and Family Farm Defenders sent me as a delegate to participate in the hungerstrike. Farm and labor groups from across the nation and four countries were represented in what was one of the largest hungerstrikes in labor history. It is really quite amazing how easy it is to not eat for five days (I had to return home before the end of the strike)

Low farmgate prices are in part, a result of market manipulation by agribusiness and are maintained with the blessing of our federal government through Farm Bill subsidy programs. Further driving down market prices is the exploitation of farmworkers. Farmers know that a major expense of operation is labor. Family owned and sustainably operated farms have no access to markets when their competition is allowed to abuse and underpay its workers.

Grim reality
The United States Department of Justice has won conviction in six labor cases (some involving slavery) in south Florida alone. The stories are all too familiar, workers are transported to the farm and arrive indebted for the cost of that transportation. The meager compensation (in some cases 15-25 dollars for a seven day week of 12 hour days) is never enough to erase the debt. Debt increases further as the costs of meager housing and inadequate food are added in. Fields are patrolled by armed guards and violence is threatened and used to keep upstarts in line. Escapees risk their lives in an attempt to reach the freedom that we as citizens assume to be enjoyed by all.

Wage parity
Of course not all workers in Florida's tomato fields are subjected to these abuses. Conditions of slavery are the worst example. Right now tomato pickers in the non-enslaved work market receive 45 cents for every 32 pound bucket of tomatoes they pick. That is the same amount (not adjusted for inflation) that workers doing the same work recieved in 1978. If wages were adjusted for inflation a 32 pound bucket would earn a worker around $1.20. As farmers struggle to establish price parity for the goods they produce, ignoring the equvalent state of affairs for farmworkers is ignoring a powerful and natural ally. In any sector of agriculture, workers must struggle against their exploiters. Establishing standards of fairness for farmworkers will be good for family farmers, too. It will also raise the price of production for exploiters closer to that of small farmers, allowing farmers that employ only themselves to compete with larger operations.

Taco Bell earns $5.2 billion a year. The CIW is asking for a penny per pound rise in wages. Taco Bell pays around 36 cents for a pound of tomatoes. A penny per pound raise would be a 3% increase in cost, but a 60 % raise for workers! The National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), Family Farm Defenders, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) all support the Taco Bell boycott and urge others to join the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in their struggle for:
1.A penny raise per pound of tomatoes. (this would still be lower pay than workers recieved in '78).
2.Inclusion in discussions between growers and corporations that buy tomatoes (ex. Taco Bell)
3.The adoption of a corporate code of conduct similar to the one used to ensure that livestock is treated humanely, but also ensures decent conditions for farmworkers.

Call 1-800-TACO-BELL and ask if they can PROVE that their tomatoes are not harvested by slaves, or why they won't ensure humane conditions for farmworkers but will for the animals that go into their food.

You can also share your opinions with:
Taco Bell CEO, Emil Brolick
17901 Von Karman, Irvine, CA 92614
#949-863-4500

For more info, check out: www.ciw-online.org